

Coal plants in cross hairs

Environmentalists make a move for cleaner technology

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Opponents have renewed hopes of improving - if not derailing - two new coal-fired power plants in central Utah.

The Utah chapter of the Sierra Club and a Sevier County citizens group have been sharpening their points for the state Air Quality Board, which will hear appeals on the two plants this fall. Meanwhile, proponents say they are eager to get on with the appeals so they can move forward with their plans.

The heart of the struggle is the state Division of Air Quality's sign-off on both plants nearly three years ago.

The Intermountain Power Service Corp.'s Unit 3 in Delta promises about 950 megawatts of new electricity. The Sevier Power Co. plans a 270-megawatt plant in Sigurd.

And both would produce air pollution and haze that Utah can't afford, according to the Sierra Club and the citizens group.

"What we're looking for is the cleanest technology," said Joro Walker of Western Resource Advocates, which represents the Sierra Club.

It was only last fall that the Sierra Club won the right to fight the plants before the Air Quality Board, which serves as an adjudicator in cases when a business, an interest group or an individual objects to an Air Quality Division action.

The Air Quality Board originally decided that the Sierra Club was not directly impacted by regulators' October 2004 decisions to allow the plants and had no legal standing to fight the permits. Then, last November, the Utah Supreme Court ruled the environmental group had a right to challenge state regulatory decisions.

The Sierra Club will take on power plant proponents in a series of hearings this fall. And Walker says she feels the arguments are persuasive for forcing more up-to-date technology at both plants.

The federal Clean Air Act pushes for the best technology available, she said. And when state regulators granted an extension on the 34-month-old permit for the Sigurd plant earlier this year, in effect, they opened the door for the opponents to demand cleaner technology.

"Obviously, you want the cleanest technology," she said.

Meanwhile, a local citizens organization called Save Our Air and Resources (SOAR) is pushing to have the entire permit scrapped over the extension. Led by many of the same people who mounted an unsuccessful appeal against the Sevier County plant, SOAR claims former air-quality director Rick Sprott approved the extension without open and proper public review, according to both state and federal law.

"We want the permit ruled invalid," said Jim Kennon, a leader of the local group.

Meanwhile, attorney Brian Burnett insists the Sigurd plant proponents have complied with the law and noted that regulators did not choose to revoke the permit during the 18-month review, as they were free to do.

"That's kind of the end of the story," he said.

He doubted that the Sierra Club's aim is only to change the plant's technology: He said the technology Sevier Power has proposed using would mean less pollution than the technology environmentalists are pushing.

"They just don't want to see the plant built," Burnett said.

As for the new unit in Delta, it's run into some trouble unrelated to the Sierra Club appeal.

The California communities that originally backed adding a third unit no longer support it. But two remaining participants, PacifiCorp and the Utah Associated Municipal Power Systems, a consortium of 49 community power providers in six states, have said they are prepared to push forward with Unit 3.

The newly formed Unit 3 Development Committee is sorting out its legal representation, and that has the Sierra Club looking at potential delays - or, maybe, a chance to attack a permit that was granted to one entity and transferred to another.

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